



## Sill, Geoffrey M., ed., *Walt Whitman of Mickle Street: A Centennial Collection* [review]

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## REVIEW

GEOFFREY M. SILL, ed. *Walt Whitman of Mickle Street: A Centennial Collection*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994, xvii + 318 pp.

Geoffrey M. Sill brings together in *Walt Whitman of Mickle Street* a number of the essays originally read at conferences hosted by the Walt Whitman Association in Camden in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Those papers were then published in the *Mickle Street Review*, the journal of the Association, which ceased publication in 1991. Until that time, Camden, home not only to the *Review* but to the renovated Whitman house and library, the Association and its various activities, and the undergraduate Whitman Studies program at the local campus of Rutgers University, was a vibrant center—even a kind of unofficial national center—for the celebration and study of Whitman. I was therefore disappointed in reading through this collection to find that, despite the title, there is nothing in it that links these essays to the site or status of Whitman's last home, a small house in what was then a mixed, working-class neighborhood of the city but that is today a largely deserted tract running along the renamed Mickle Boulevard—a sad sign of Camden's recent hard times. This lack of connection between the essays and their title seems a shame, since, as a number of the authors in this collection assume, Whitman has a continuing relevance to the social and political life of the United States that has no parallel among American poets, a judgment one also encounters widely among both his native and foreign readers.

So much for omission. What the collection does offer is an assemblage of twenty-six essays that provide continuing testimony to Whitman's power to attract sharp, provocative discourse about poetry, politics, and academia. Unquestionably, the contents of this volume run a wider range of quality than one usually finds in collections of this sort. Some essays are light-weight and several are simply not suited for publication. The best of the essays, though, are good enough to justify the existence of the collection. And, taken together, they provide interesting points of view on the ways that Whitman is being made available to scholarly analysis in the late years of our century.

Though loosely organized, one can nevertheless discern in the collection two basic foci: politics and world reception. I will deal with them in turn, beginning with the former, which here (as in Whitman scholarship generally for the last decade or so) figures as the dominant theme and mode of critical discourse. To pose the matter first skeptically: With so much already written about Whitman and politics, does any more remain to be said? The overarching answer presented by this volume is that Whitman is and ought to remain a central topic for such analysis. That answer comes most articulately not so much from specific essays as from the intersections and contradictions formed between a variety of them, as different writers define and employ "politics" in different ways. For Peter Balakian and Betsy Erkkila, the key is the alignment

(or misalignment) between Whitman's views about society and power as expressed in his poems and analogous views today; for Sandra Gilbert, David S. Reynolds, and Jerome Loving, the key is gender politics; for Alan Trachtenberg, it is what he calls Whitman's "visionary politics"; and for Xilao Li, it is the correspondence between Whitman's friendly and receptive views of the ethnic or racial alien and progressive views today.

In the opening essay of the book, Daniel Hoffman quickly fastens onto Whitman's fascination with the "Self"—a self he aptly describes as "protean, shape-shifting, ever changing, a universal self enjoying its own metamorphic powers"—and identifies it as one of the markers of Whitman's poetry. Although that view has been a common one in Whitman criticism over the years, hardly a single essayist in this volume follows Hoffman in seeing it as a capitalized abstraction, and only a small minority follow him in linking it to Whitman's aesthetic practices (Hoffman's view being that the self is "inconceivable apart from the poetics in which it is embodied"). Rather, the majority of the critics in this book, many belonging to a younger generation of scholarship, cut away in an opposite direction to examine more strictly the interplay between the self and the world. One reason why this is so may be seen in their contrasting interpretations of the powerful little conjunction "yet" that Whitman carefully positioned between the "self" and the "En-Masse" of society in his most carefully and shrewdly ideological poem, "One's-Self I Sing." Where Hoffman tends to minimize its power of mediacy, reading it as virtually synonymous with "and," the general tendency of the essayists is to treat it far more warily and to examine the gaps—many of which can be defined as political—that crop up in the poems between Whitman's persona and the world in which he moves, not to mention between the biographical Whitman and the figurations of his poems.

Perhaps the essay that swerves most directly away from Hoffman is that of Betsy Erkkila, who opens with the opinion (taken verbatim from her thesis in *Whitman the Political Poet*) that Whitman is "one of America's most overtly political poets" and proceeds to examine some of the implications of that statement. For a full formulation of her thinking, one should read her book. Her judgments here are tougher, as she presents an expanded interpretation of Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass* by examining the correlation she sees between the expansionist political rhetoric of Whitman's journalism and of his 1855 Preface and the imperialist poetics of his poems. Her analysis comes to rest on a disturbing paradox: the voice of personal and national liberation in *Leaves of Grass* was one that in effect drowned out alternative voices, just as its rhetoric of expansion encroached upon, even absorbed within itself, the territory of other peoples (Mexicans, Native Americans, African-Americans). The best example she offers is Whitman's treatment of Goliad in Section 34 of "Song of Myself," which she sees not only as a highly fictionalized sketch but also as a gallingly chauvinistic one. For what this perception is worth, it is right.

There is certainly something to be learned from the position of relative ideological skepticism taken by Erkkila here, which serves as a necessary corrective to the overly celebratory tone taken by Peter Balakian in reading Whitman (especially Whitman of *Democratic Vistas*) as a modern Jeremiah decrying the

venality and materialism of post-Civil War America. Perhaps Balakian is right in saying that Whitman may be taken as a model for twentieth-century prophetic poetry, an influence on, even an inspiration for, recent writers such as Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, and Adrienne Rich. Still, strictly speaking, the jeremiad is hardly the exclusive property of the political left; historically, the opposite has been and is now more nearly the case. Furthermore, I cannot help but sense that Balakian's argument says more about our era and our preoccupations than about Whitman and his. Then again, this stricture applies as much to Erkkila as to Balakian, since their essays, more closely considered, operate on similar academic ideological terms. They both set Whitman to and judge him against the ideological standards of the present. What emerges from both of them is a reading of Whitman primarily for and in terms of the *statement* of his views, as expressed in his writings. For me, such narrowly literalist readings seem as stunted in one way as were the strictly formalist readings of a previous generation in an opposed way.

A more supple and useful treatment of politics comes from Alan Trachtenberg, who begins with the claim that Whitman is simply "not a figure about whom it makes any reasonable sense to say that he had 'a' politics" when in fact his writing was both broadly and profoundly political. But not smoothly so. Where Hoffman downplays the problematic meeting of the individual and the collective in "One's-Self I Sing," Trachtenberg finds the "yet" that stands between them a "tense" border and the poem's opening pair of lines as "mark[ing] the threshold to Whitman's world." In fact, Trachtenberg finds a saturation of poetry in politics throughout the full corpus of Whitman's poetry, his intentions for that poetry, and the means of audience address through which he transmitted it to the public. His primary concern in this essay, though, is not with *Leaves of Grass* but with *Democratic Vistas*, a text long prominent in Trachtenberg's thinking and central here to his analysis of Whitman as a major American exponent of a visionary politics. Reading that essay closely, he sees Whitman as no less a visionary idealist than Emerson, attuned to the threats to the democracy if blind to the dangers posed to it from industrial capitalism. A private/public servant to his sweeping vision of democracy, Whitman went after the vision and sought to make it a reality through language. Of all the essays in the book, Trachtenberg's provides the most satisfying account of both the mission of Whitman's life work and the medium through which he sought to accomplish it.

One can also sense a similar pressure of current circumstances running just below the surface of the essays of Reynolds, Loving, and Gilbert in their discussions of Whitman and gender politics, a subject that fits Whitman extraordinarily well. Reynolds draws on his wide acquaintance with antebellum popular culture to make the claim that Whitman handled the issue of gender as he handled most other issues: in direct response to the popular culture of the era. Following Whitman's own statement about the equally unhealthy contemporary views of sexuality verging, alternately, on feminine sentimentality and male coarseness (that Reynolds renames the "conventional" and the "subversive"), he positions Whitman at the sane median between them. In making this claim, Reynolds assumes too much and proves too little. How do we know, for instance, that Whitman's "overriding goal was to absorb his popular culture's

shocking images [of sexuality] but at the same time to purify them"? Can the eroticism of Whitman's poetry be unequivocally called purified? And all of it? But even if one grants Reynolds his interpretation of Whitman's intentions, his analysis is based on a reductive view of the relations between art, nature, and biography. The mirror his essay holds up to art and nature seems too smooth to satisfy a late-twentieth-century critical sensibility.

Jerome Loving's is a more skeptically tempered approach to the man he dubs "the Good *Gay* Poet." For him, Whitman is a poet whose projections of heterosexual relations, far from conforming to Reynolds' reading of them as healthy recreation, are largely acts of verbal fantasy ("sex in the subjunctive"). Rather than crediting Whitman with any particular knowledge of or investment in representing heterosexual relations, he sees Whitman's strength in this regard as one of a powerfully inventive voyeur who abstracts such relations from the realm of society and projects them onto that of nature. Human life, in this sense, is always for Whitman "unfolded out of the folds" not of women but of *woman*.

That view would not make many friends for Whitman among feminist critics, one of whom, Sandra Gilbert, reads Whitman here specifically through feminist eyes. Her approach is an intriguing one: to read Whitman against Dickinson by correlating the poets to psychoanalytically-posed norms of male and female sexuality. Drawing her conceptual terminology in abbreviated fashion from her 1986 essay, "The American Sexual Poetics of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson" (published in Sacvan Bercovitch's collection of revisionist essays, *Reconstructing American Literary History*), she focuses here on what she calls "rituals of [poetic] initiation," taking as her male and female proof texts Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and Dickinson's Poem #754 ("My life had stood—a Loaded Gun—"). Interesting though her argument is, it provides few surprises: Whitman adheres to " 'a Law of the Father,' a principle of male poetic identity retrieved from and through a resistance to the deadly lure of the mother," whereas Dickinson rejects determinacy for "subversion" and "bewilderment." Unfortunately, not only is the analysis poorly balanced (with only a "brief coda" being devoted to reading Dickinson) and incompletely argued, but it is so selective in its choice of poems that its value as a representative presentation of the two poets is questionable.

A different version of the wide-ranging scholarly interest in Whitman as a subject for political/ideological discourse is the essay by Xilao Li on Whitman's reception by immigrant groups, which interprets Whitman's poetry as proffering the free and easy welcome of a "father" (or should it be a "mother"?), receiving his ethnic "sons and daughters" into the American fold. That reading is surely too straight and narrow an account of Whitman to be wholly acceptable. Whitman was no simple lover of each and all; early in his career, he flirted with the powerfully nativist politics of the 1840s, and seldom in his life did he form real or sentimental attachments to people of color or of distant cultures. On the other hand, set into a more critical context, his account does have its insights, for Whitman certainly stands out among American writers of his time for his *imaginative* openness to the "other." At a time when Anglo-Saxonism exercised a firm grip over authors, publishers, and readers alike, Whitman's inclusiveness gave a broader periphery to the fact and the idea of culture, and

one inviting to those previously alien to it. The best proof of that fact, as Li well knows, is in the generally enthusiastic reception that Whitman has been accorded by those incoming groups.

The last seven essays of the book explore Whitman's impact on and reception into non-American cultures. As elsewhere, the quality of the essays is uneven. Roger Asselineau's piece on Whitman's attraction to Sand, Béranger, Hugo, and other French writers is a light piece better suited to oral delivery than print. Yassen Zassoursky's on Whitman's reception in Russia is more serious but still too superficial to do justice to its subject. Sill states in an endnote that he was unable to reach Zassoursky, a student of the pioneering Soviet Whitman scholar Morris Mendelssohn, and himself an established figure in Soviet academia, about revising the piece. He probably should have left the matter at that. Gay Wilson Allen gives a different angle on the subject in his anecdotal account of his personal dealings with Kornei Chukovsky, Whitman's major Russian translator—one more instance of Allen's centrality, personally as well as biographically, to twentieth-century Whitman analysis. But, except for its incidental reflection of the complexities and intricacies of Soviet culture, it, too, fails to provide much coverage of Whitman's reception into the poetry-loving culture of Russia.

The most scholarly is Walter Grünzweig's examination of the connection between Whitman and the German-language Expressionists. Grünzweig's most interesting point is that Whitman appealed to both the visionary and skeptical groups of Expressionists, and his most surprising point is that Whitman penetrated the thinking even of the latter group's most enigmatic figure, Franz Kafka. A different approach is that of the Icelandic man of letters, Sigurdur A. Magnússon, one of the countless people who began their acquaintance with Whitman by finding his poetry a "hard nut to crack" but who gradually developed a taste for it. Magnússon, in fact, promises at the end of his essay that his translation of "Song of Myself," one of the first translations of Whitman into Icelandic, would be in print by the end of 1994. Unfortunately, he does not really discuss the concerns and problems that the gaps between English and Icelandic brought to his translation—a subject well worth an analysis projected onto a broad scale of languages and national cultures. His essay instead eloquently discusses his impressions of assimilating a quintessentially non-European poet (writing, for Magnússon, in the "American anti-egghead tradition") into his own terms.

Though far from satisfying as a group, these final essays in the collection are—to use a Whitmanism—"suggestive." In shifting Whitman from an exclusively and sometimes narrowly American to an international context, they highlight one of the most important vistas awaiting Whitman scholarship and, beyond Whitman, American literary scholarship generally.

A few words about some of the less easily classifiable essays. Ed Folsom's essay on Whitman's canny reading and manipulation of the new democratic art of photography for purposes of poetic self-presentation is one of the most engaging, perceptive essays in the collection. Through its content and example, it invites further cross-medium examination of Whitman's poetry and career. Kenneth Price's study of the influence of Whitman on Hamlin Garland traces an already well-known friendship between the men onto the fresh territory of

fiction. One can readily sense from its example the value of a follow-up project that examines more generally Whitman's influence on late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century prose. Tenney Nathanson's supple essay on audience address in Whitman touches on a "hot" topic that he subsequently dealt with far more deeply in his book, *Whitman's Presence*. Finally, Vivian R. Pollak's essay pairs "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" with the "Calamus" sequence as poetic expressions of their author's homoerotic sublimation, which, like numerous previous Whitman critics, she ascribes to a powerfully autobiographical impulse erupting in Whitman around 1859.

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